

Executive Summary

How can schools and districts best support the development of young people's literacy, from birth through the end of high school? That was the question that drove the creation of the Montana Literacy Plan (MLP) in late 2010. The next year, Montana was one of only six states to win a competitive federal Striving Readers grant to fund the implementation of that plan.

Using those funds, the Montana Office of Public Instruction (OPI) implemented the Montana Striving Readers Project (MSRP) in 43 schools and pre-kindergarten centers across the state. These schools and centers received subgrants to develop and implement a comprehensive literacy plan based on the MLP. Schools and centers began their work in January 2012. During the 2012–2013 school year, at least 10,150 students and 850 teachers and staff members benefited from the MSRP. This year's evaluation reports on what the state provided for schools, what schools did, and examines any impact on student learning.

State-provided Support

OPI provided support to schools and centers implementing the MSRP in several ways. It recently revised the MLP to include systematic processes such as self-assessment, action planning, and a continuous improvement cycle. These processes allow school- and center-based leadership teams to assess their literacy system, develop a plan to improve it, and then measure progress and growth in that endeavor, over time. The MLP focuses on seven areas—Leadership, Instruction and Interventions, Assessment and Data-based Decision Making, Professional Development, Community and Family Involvement, Standards, and System-wide Commitment.

OPI provided leadership teams with professional development and technical assistance around these seven areas throughout the year. Training was provided by OPI staff members and a team of consultants made up of literacy experts from around the nation. School staff members participated in required statewide meetings and site-based visits from these same trainers. At the meetings, leadership teams received professional development and, with the help of the trainers, they developed plans for bringing the professional development back to their site. During site visits, trainers worked with the leadership team and teachers and aides to implement the plan. Nearly all MSRP school staff members reported participating in professional development this year. Most agreed it had the characteristics of effective professional development—that is, that it was ongoing, student-focused, and of high quality and sufficient quantity.

Site-based Work

Each MSRP-funded school has a leadership team charged with developing and overseeing implementation of a comprehensive literacy plan. Teams collect, analyze, and use data from a variety of sources, such as student reading assessments, principal observations of teachers instructing students, and the MLP self-assessment, to set goals and measure progress.

During their implementation of the MSRP, school staff members reported the most growth in five of the seven areas—Leadership, Instruction and Interventions, Assessment and Data-based Decision Making, Professional Development, and System-wide Commitment. Less growth was reportedly made in the areas of Community and Family Involvement, and Standards. These findings were especially true at the pre-kindergarten and elementary school levels.

MSRP schools have many strengths. These include widespread support for the MSRP program and literacy-focused professional development at the school and district levels. Teachers and aides reported using evidence-based literacy programs and providing literacy support to students in language arts classes as well as content area classes, such as science, social studies, and mathematics. Staff members agreed their schools had systems in place for administering and collecting assessments and analyzing, distributing, and using student assessment data. These systems included supports for all students—those reading, writing, and communicating at proficient levels and those that needed additional support to do so. Furthermore, many teachers also reported providing additional support to students struggling in those same areas. Finally, pre-kindergarten staff members almost universally agreed they provided supports to children and families as they transitioned into the K-12 education system. Many also established partnerships with community organizations to support literacy outside the school day.

Challenges exist. While school and center staff members received professional development, some felt they needed more time to work with their colleagues to plan and make changes in the classroom. While many teachers indicated providing additional support to struggling students, not all students received such support, nor did all teachers and aides feel as though they had the resources they needed to do so effectively. Although not a strong focal area for professional development during Year 2, some staff members reported needing additional time to align their curriculum to the Montana Early Learning Guidelines (MELG) or the new Montana Common Core Standards for English Language Arts (MCCS). While many elementary, middle, and high school staff members agreed they supported students and families in their transitions from elementary to middle, middle to high, and high to post-secondary settings, these supports were not as universal as at the pre-kindergarten level. Partnerships with community and private/public sector entities to support literacy were not as commonplace either. Finally, communication from leadership team members to the broader staff and community was a challenge.

Student Impacts

The ultimate goals of all the work at the state and school level are to

- Raise student achievement in reading for all students and students in lower-performing subgroups

- Decrease the percentage of students dropping out of high school, while increasing the percentage of students graduating

Student-level outcomes do not consistently reflect the changes in practice occurring at the MSRP schools.

On most MSRP assessments, students made gains in the percentage of students performing proficiently.

Elementary school students made consistent gains across all MSRP assessments. Within-year gains were evidenced on the Istation Indicators of Progress (ISIP)/Dynamic Indicators of Basic Literacy Skills (DIBELS) and across-year gains were evidenced on the ISIP/DIBELS and the state reading assessment, the MontCAS (+14, +9, and +2, respectively).

Middle/high school students made gains many, but not all, assessments from one administration to the next. In spring, a larger percentage of students scored proficient on the ISIP/DIBELS than did in fall (+5) and significant gains were made in writing from fall to spring (+0.2). Across years, a smaller proportion of middle/high school students scored proficient on the ISIP/DIBELS (-2), there was no change in mean writing scores, but average college readiness scores (as measured by the ACT) increased from 2011 to 2012 (+2.9). While a smaller proportion of middle school students scored proficient on the MontCAS in 2013 compared to 2012 (-8), a larger proportion of high school students did (+3).

Pre-kindergarten students also had mixed success. While 64 percent made significant gains in their oral language skills from fall 2012 to spring 2013, these gains were not enough to keep them proficient, as proficiency standards changed over that same time period. As a result, a significantly smaller percentage of pre-kindergarten students were proficient on their reading assessment in spring compared to fall (-14). However, from spring 2012 to spring 2013 a larger proportion of pre-kindergarten students were proficient (+2). It is important to note that OPI and MSRP preschool center staff members question the validity of the ISIP for preschool children.

From spring 2012 to spring 2013, most subgroups of students experienced improved student performance. This was especially true for economically disadvantaged students and American Indian students. Students eligible for special education services and LEP students had more variable success.

While dropout rates were declining and graduation rates were increasing across the state, only one MSRP high school experienced declining dropout rates, and one-half of the high schools experienced increasing graduation rates.